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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000844

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: LEBANON EXPERT SEES SHI'A DEMOGRAPHIC
"CRASH," WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR HIZBALLAH

REF: A. 04 BEIRUT 5231
[1](#)B. 05 BEIRUT 2089

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Lebanon scholar William Harris described a demographic "crash" of Lebanon's Shi'a community, a phenomenon at odds with commonly-held views of the community's size and growth trends. Pointing to the experience of his relatives by marriage as typical of that of many Lebanese Shi'as, Harris said there has been a dramatic drop in average family size, compounded by the effects of emigration and marriage outside the community. With the Shi'a natural increase rate now not far from those of Lebanon's other principal confessional groups, Harris sees Shi'as making up little more than one-third of the population, a ratio that shows no sign of changing anytime soon. Awareness of this growth slowdown in its constituent base may have been a reason behind Hizballah's recent engagement with Michel Aoun, according to Harris. End summary.

UNDERNEATH BELLICOSE HIZBALLAH RHETORIC...

[1](#)2. (C) Charge d'affaires and embassy staff recently had an opportunity to speak at length with William Harris, professor of history at the University of Otago in New Zealand and author of the recently published "The New Face of Lebanon," a history of modern Lebanon. Harris was in Lebanon to conduct research for a forthcoming history of Lebanon (from the seventh century, A.D., to the present day) for the Oxford University Press. Harris lived, taught, and conducted research in Lebanon over the course of several years in the 1980s, and has visited Lebanon periodically since then for family and professional reasons.

[1](#)3. (C) Harris's wife is Lebanese-born and a Shi'a Muslim, and many of her relatives live in the predominantly Shi'a southern suburbs of Beirut. Harris told us that his first impression of the current political situation came shortly after his arrival at Beirut's international airport. Picked up by a brother-in-law and another relative, Harris received

an excited account of the latest word on the street, about how the "shabab" of Hizballah were readying to march on Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's mountain castle of Moukhtara, where they would "grab" their former longtime ally, who has lately become a relentless critic. As in a previous conversation (Ref A), Harris described this sort of posturing as playing well with a large part of the Shi'a population, the attitudes of which have been shaped by a steady diet of Hizballah's "al-Manar" television station and "an-Nour" radio station, and little else.

... IS A HUGE DROP IN SHI'A POPULATION GROWTH

¶4. (C) Hizballah's shrill rhetoric aside, Harris suggested that its constituent base, the Shi'a community, is not nearly as large as many think it to be. Mistakenly assuming that high-growth trends of the mid-twentieth century have continued uninterrupted to the present day, many observers overestimate the Shi'a community's size relative to that of Lebanon's other confessional groups. Harris argued that there has in fact been a demographic "crash" in the Shi'a community, following a peak in its growth during the 1970s and 1980s.

¶5. (C) Using his own extended family as an example, Harris said his wife is one of nine children. She and her brothers and sisters had, among them, twelve children of their own. Of those twelve, three -- Harris's -- live in New Zealand. Minus those three, a generation of nine has in effect produced another generation of nine. This was a demographic "crash" by any standard, Harris argued.

¶6. (C) Marriage outside the community and emigration were additional sources of downward pressure on the rate of population growth. In Harris's in-laws' case, two of his wife's siblings are married to Russians -- one of them to a

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Russian Jew. Harris's wife moved with him to New Zealand, while another sibling immigrated to Russia. Harris suggested that his wife's family's experience was typical of that of many Lebanese Shi'ites.

SHI'AS LARGEST SINGLE GROUP BUT
NOWHERE NEAR A MAJORITY

¶7. (C) Harris said that the Shi'a rate of natural increase is now probably little different from that of Lebanon's other principal confessional groups. He estimated that the Shi'a account for no more than 35 percent of the total population of Lebanon. This would make them the largest single confessional group, although nowhere near the majority status that some -- including some less-than-well-informed foreign observers -- claim for them.

¶8. (C) Harris said he continued to use the estimated confessional breakdown of the population of Lebanon that he first presented in his 1996 book, "Faces of Lebanon":

- Maronite Catholics: 21 percent
- other Christians: 14 percent
- (Twelver) Shi'a Muslims: 35 percent
- Sunni Muslims: 24 percent
- Druze: 5 percent
- Alawis: 1 percent

... AND NO SIGN OF THAT CHANGING

¶9. (C) Harris said that the relative sizes of last year's two major demonstrations, the Hizballah-orchestrated, largely Shi'a demonstration in Beirut's Riad as-Solh square on March 8, 2005, and the demonstration organized by Hariri supporters and their allies on Martyrs' Square on March 14, 2005 --

mainly Sunni Muslims, Druze, and Christians -- tended to confirm his original estimates. The March 14 demonstration was roughly twice the size of the March 8 demonstration. It made sense that the March 14 demonstration -- assuming that Sunnis, Christians, and Druze make up almost two-thirds of the population -- was twice the size of the March 8 demonstration -- assuming Shi'as make up about one-third of the population.

¶10. (C) Lebanese demographics are particularly tricky to study, according to Harris. A large number of Lebanese shift back and forth between their home villages and Beirut, making double-counting a potential source of error for any survey. This is particularly an issue with the Shi'a population, many members of which shift between the rural South and Beirut. In addition, part of Lebanon's diaspora, in regions of the world such as West Africa, moves seasonally between Lebanon and their adopted countries. This includes many Shi'as.

DOES THIS EXPLAIN HIZBALLAH'S AOUN STRATEGY?

¶11. (C) Harris said that, regardless of what outside observers may think about the relative size of the Shi'a community, the leadership of Hizballah surely has a good grasp of actual Shi'a numbers and growth trends. Concern about slow growth -- or no growth -- of its constituent base would explain Hizballah's efforts to defend its position through accommodations with other political forces -- those of Michel Aoun, for example. This could explain the surprising concessions (on the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons, for example) that Hizballah, despite its self-inflating and pro-Syrian rhetoric, offered in the agreement that Aoun signed with Hizballah Secretary-General Nasrallah in February.

¶12. (C) Harris pointed out that Aoun takes pride in a certain amount of political penetration in the Shi'a community. In the southern suburban district of Shiyah, where many of Harris's in-laws live, for example, Aoun is by far and away the most popular presidential contender. In comparison with Hizballah -- the ideology of which, by definition, limits membership to Shi'as -- Aoun has the advantage of having a certain amount of cross-confessional appeal. Aoun -- like Nasrallah -- is probably aware of trends in Shi'a demography and their political implications, and this explained, for Harris, Aoun's willingness to enter

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into an alliance with Hizballah.

... OR AOUN'S HIZBALLAH STRATEGY?

¶13. (C) Harris noted that skeptical observers see Aoun, in his single-minded quest for the presidency, offering an open-ended endorsement of Hizballah's continued existence as a militia, in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions, in return for Hizballah's support in a presidential election. Harris suggested that Aoun sees himself as taking advantage of Hizballah's perceived weaknesses to secure the presidency without actually compromising his principles as a "man of the state." Harris noted that Aoun had told him during a July 2005 visit to Lebanon that Hizballah's power had already peaked. He suspected that Aoun, should he be elected president, might well try to embark on a plan to disarm Hizballah.

BASE OF SUPPORT REMAINS LOYAL,
EVEN IF IT ISN'T GROWING

¶14. (C) As for other political actors, Harris surmised that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri will likely try to differentiate himself from Hizballah without actually confronting it. Given Berri's association with corruption on

a massive scale, he was unlikely to get far in positioning himself as an alternative to Hizballah. Harris expected his in-laws -- who are far from being religious fundamentalists -- to continue supporting Hizballah politically for the foreseeable future, because they saw it as a formidable defender of communal interests.

¶15. (C) This mentality, according to Harris, put limits on the inroads that independent Shi'a politicians -- some of them from a younger generation of the prominent landed families, such as the Asa'ads, that once dominated pre-civil war Shi'a politics -- could make, regardless of any changes in the rules of Lebanon's electoral game. It also had a chilling effect on the enthusiasm that many Shi'a businessmen -- with an eye towards opportunities in commerce and tourism across a peaceful border with Israel -- used to have for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) While foreign journalists have made frequent, careless references to Lebanon's "Shi'a majority," Harris is one of a few observers who have suggested that the truth is quite different. Ref B noted the conclusions of Dr. Mohammad Faour of the American University in Beirut, who pointed out that Shi'a fertility rates have fallen from exceptionally high levels of the early 1970s, that Shi'a mortality rates were above average during the civil war (much of which was fought in predominantly Shi'a areas), and that Shi'ites, like Christians, emigrate heavily.
MURRAY